SOME UNFINISHED BUSINESS
May 16, 2010

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 97
John 17:20–26
John 21:1–19

“Do you love me?” . . .
“Feed my sheep.”
John 21:17 (NRSV)

No event in your life can imprison you.
This is what resurrection is about.
I shall not allow the events of my life
to make me their prisoner. . . .
I shall continually believe that
God is not through with
my life, or with me.

Howard Thurman

We come here this morning to be reminded
that you are, that we are not alone.
We come to be reminded that no matter
what is happening to us, our lives matter to you.
So startle us with your truth. And open our minds
and our hearts to your presence in the world
and in every day of our lives. Amen.

My colleague Vicki Curtiss preached a fine sermon on April 18. I am returning to the passage this morning not because of any deficiencies in Vicki’s sermon—there were none; it was a really good sermon—but for the simple reason that I don’t ordinarily get to preach on this text because it comes in the lectionary on the second Sunday after Easter, when I am away. Someone might suggest that the resolution is that I don’t have to go to Italy. In that that is not really an option, for reasons I can’t get into now, I’m exercising a little prerogative here this morning—and my Presbyterian freedom—by returning to the passage. The fact is, none of us can exhaust its meaning and relevance. I think it is my favorite story in the entire Bible.

Author Reynolds Price said that nowhere in a lifetime of reading had he encountered anything that “surpasses the simple conviction, the pure-water flow of John 21” (*Incarnation,* p. 69). It is about what it means to be a human being. It is about a man who, in all his humanness, encounters Jesus Christ. It is about what it means to be a Christian, his follower. It is about some “unfinished business,” which is what Frances Taylor Gench calls it in the last chapter of her fine book *Encounters with Jesus*, which I have been following since the first of the year. It is about the sea and a night of fishing with your best friends in all the world, with whom you have shared an incredible experience and unimaginable grief. It is about early morning on the beach, a place where I would love to begin every day of my life. It is about a charcoal fire and fish cooking on the grill and bread lightly toasting, maybe with a little extra virgin olive oil brushed on top. All my life I’ve been able to smell the aroma of that fire, with the fish and bread, and it makes my mouth water still. And it is about a man who has always intrigued me, a man you can understand and identify with, a man who emerges from the pages and comes to life, Simon, son of John, whom Jesus renamed Peter, the rock.

The tradition is that Peter’s life ended in martyrdom, in Rome, where he was crucified upside down at his request, so as not to imitate or replicate the crucifixion of his Lord. It is a moment captured by one of the greatest and most compelling paintings in the world, one by Caravaggio (1600). The painting is in the chapel of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome, at the gate where pilgrims from the north entered the city. Perhaps you have seen a reproduction or the painting itself. It takes your breath away. It’s a large canvas. The backdrop is utter black. Three men are struggling to lift a cross, as if the weight is simply too great, one of them crouched with his back against the beam, another pulling at a rope. The figure on the cross, head lower than his feet, is an old man, still muscular, strong, his head raised, his face, I think, one of the most striking faces in all of art: pain, but more than the obvious physical pain, a fierce, stubborn determination. He will not give in. He will not fail, will not, this time deny his Lord.

I’m not the only one who is compelled. If you Google St. Peter and film, which I did—more honestly, I asked someone to do it for me—you will discover three full pages of references, 158 motion pictures and popular actors who have played the role of Peter, including Lorne Green and Omar Sharif.

He’s impetuous, a man of action who doesn’t sit around much pondering, but speaks, acts. The first time he appears in the narrative, he’s sitting in his fishing boat on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. A young rabbi from Nazareth, Jesus, walks by, says “Follow me,” and Peter drops the oars in the boat, steps out, and follows. In the middle of the story, at a moment of supreme mysticism on a mountaintop with Jesus and James and John, a moment that demanded reverent silence, Peter blurts out, “Let’s build something to mark the spot.” At the Last Supper, as Jesus begins to wash the feet of the disciples, Peter objects, “Not my feet, Lord. I should be washing your feet.” Later when Jesus alludes to the fact that one them will betray him, Peter demands to know which one of them is the traitor. And when Jesus predicts that they will all abandon him in the hours immediately ahead, Peter objects, then boasts: “Not me, Lord. Everyone else might run away but I’ll stick with you to the end. I will die with you if need be.” “Peter, Peter, Jesus says, “you, too, before the night is out. You too will deny me, three times.”

A few hours later, when the guards come to arrest Jesus in the garden where he is praying, Peter alone resists, draws his sword, strikes back, cuts the ear off one of the guards. That was the moment: his blood was up, passion in full force; he would have fought and died for Jesus in that moment. But Jesus stopped it. “Put your sword away, Peter.” And when they tied Jesus’ hands behind his back and led him away into the night, all of them, Peter too, backed away slowly so as not to be noticed, a few careful steps, and then turned and ran away into the night.

Peter alone stopped, turned around, and followed from a distance, as the guards with their torches and drawn swords and spears lead the prisoner to the palace of the high priest for interrogation. He stood outside in the courtyard, joined a small crowd of onlookers, the guards, members of the high priest’s staff. It was midnight now. Someone had built a fire. Peter warmed himself, and suddenly a woman, one of the priest’s staff, recognized him. “You there–you’re one of them, aren’t you?” “No,” Peter said, “I am not.” A while later it happened again. “Say—you’re one of his disciples, if I’m not mistaken.” And again Peter said, “No, not me.” And then one of the ones who had been in the garden when Jesus was arrested: “Of course you are. I saw you with him in the garden.” Again, a third time, Peter denied Jesus vehemently, with a curse: “Damn it, I told you: I never met the man!

You know, you can carry the memory of something like that around with you for the rest of your life.

Fast forward: Jesus is gone. Crucified as a common criminal. Buried. When Mary returned to their hiding place in Jerusalem on the first day of the week saying that the tomb was empty, again it was Peter who acted, impetuously, with John—left the room and ran to the tomb. John outran the older man but was too frightened to step into the tomb. Not Peter: when he arrived, winded, he walked right in, saw that it was empty.

But now weeks had passed and nothing more. One by one, or in groups of twos and threes, they left the locked room and as inconspicuously as possible left the city and headed north, to home, to Galilee. Several of them planned to meet at one of the small fishing villages along the shore where they had worked before this unlikely adventure began.

What to do now? They had been through a lot together, had followed him as he walked from village to village, teaching in the synagogues, healing the sick, touching the untouchable, blessing the children. They had followed reluctantly as he headed south to Jerusalem for Passover, had walked behind in amazement and fear as he rode into the city and was greeted by crowds of palm-waving pilgrims who thought he was the Messiah. They had shared the terrible intimacy of the Last Supper, had stood in the crowd that was screaming for his crucifixion, and from a safe distance watched as they nailed him to a cross. Sometimes after danger and stress and tragedy and grief you want nothing more than the familiar, the comfort of your old life, safe, secure, without either risk or excitement. “I don’t know about you, but I’m going fishing,” Peter said, untied his boat, which he had continued to use to support his family during the three years he followed Jesus. The nets were still there. “We’re coming along,” they all said. Nothing better than a night with these friends, in a boat, with oars, a sail, rudder, and nets. It didn’t much matter, but they fished all night without success.

Now the sky is lighter, the sun not yet up. A voice comes from shore: “Boys! Have you caught anything?” “No,” laughing the knowing laugh of unsuccessful fishermen. “Nothing, not even a bite.” “Try the other side.” It was not uncommon for someone on the shore to see a school of fish invisible from the boat. So they did, threw the big round net, with lead weights, with precision, and it engulfed a school of fish.

There was something about the voice, the inflection, the intimate “boys” he had called them many times, something about the way he was standing there in the early light. It was John who said, “I think it’s Jesus.” Peter, without a word, plunged over the side and swam to shore, stood and faced Jesus for the first time since their eyes met as Jesus was taken from the courtyard of the high priest, that is from the place of Peter’s shame.

The others followed, dragging the net full of fish. “Bring a few here; put them on the fire.” I wonder what it was like—the silence except for the lapping of the waves, the screech of a gull, the crackle of the coals, the smell of the fish and bread, their gnawing hunger for that food, but also for so much more. They ate in silence, I think. They had nothing to say, nothing they could find words to say. He would have to break the silence. “What do you say to a friend who has betrayed you on the worst day of both of your lives?” (see Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus*).

Jesus, suddenly formal, calls Peter by his full name, just as parents say the full name of a child to signify serious business is about to ensue. “Diane Elizabeth.” “Anne Louise.” “Alice,” I called Ali Trowbridge, and she laughed and said the only time anyone called her Alice was her father when she was in trouble. “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “ Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

“Feed my lambs,” Jesus said.

They all know what is happening. They had heard him boast that he would never deny Jesus. They knew what happened that night in the courtyard.

Three times “Do you love me?” just as there were three denials, three times. “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Three times. “Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.”

There are few things in life quite as satisfying as to be able to say, “I told you so.” You know or see or understand something no one else does and you warn, “Don’t do that.” But they do it anyhow, and what you predicted would happen, happens, and you can say “I told you so” and it feels so good. And Jesus didn’t do it. Who could resist at least reminding Peter that Jesus predicted his denial? Who could resist at least a gentle reminder that a terrible betrayal had happened?

Jesus keeps it simple, straight, no recrimination, no accusation, not a hint of injured pride, wounded ego, none of the emotional manipulation you and I are so expert at. Just “Do you love me? Feed my sheep.” Three times.

Vicki Curtiss titled her sermon “Beyond Guilt.” Jesus does not want Peter’s guilt. The scene is perfect for a full accounting, a literal “come to Jesus,” complete confession, remorse. It’s a perfect opportunity for some hard-nosed truth-telling. “Peter, you do this kind of thing all the time—speak and act before you think. Look at you, standing there, dripping wet, shivering, naked, you’re pathetic. Isn’t it about time you got your act together?” A perfect opportunity for some recompense, some payback. “It’s going to take a little work and a little time, Peter. Stay on the straight and narrow; don’t do or say anything stupid for three weeks and then get back to me.”

It is, instead, a moment of pure grace, unconditional love and acceptance. Jesus can handle everything Peter has done or failed to do, including his shameful, cowardly betrayal. All Jesus wants is Peter’s love, Peter’s heart.

There are basically two types of popular religion. The first focuses on human failures, moral lapses, and asks for a regular, in-depth accounting of all you have done that you shouldn’t have done. It’s a religion obsessed with sin. It’s driven by guilt.

The other type of popular religion is the opposite. Its focus is on making you feel good about yourself and seems to say that your failures and denials and betrayals don’t matter. Sometimes it is called therapeutic religion. The old *Saturday Night Live* Stuart Smalley character was its embodiment: “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it cheap grace.

Jesus accepts Peter, but there has been a cost. Jesus has died on the cross, in a sense, because of Peter’s denial and Judas’s betrayal and the fearful abandonment of all of them—has covered all of it with his life, his grace, his love.

But there is work to do now. There are lambs to feed and sheep to tend.

American novelist Reynolds Price thinks this scene on the beach with Jesus is the most extraordinary in all of the literature because it conveys the words human beings most crave to hear: “The Maker of all things loves me.”

The conclusion is simple and as quiet as that breakfast. Put yourself in it.

Who hasn’t denied and betrayed and disappointed? Who hasn’t at some point along the way failed to live up to the hopes and expectations of others or yourself? Who hasn’t failed to love and forgive and be generous and think of something and someone other than yourself? Large or small, terrible or trivial, you can carry that load around all your life until it wears you down, paralyzes you.

Well, you don’t have to. You can literally come to Jesus and lay it all down at his feet.

“No event in your life can imprison you. This is what resurrection is about,” Howard Thurman said. You are invited to draw yourself into that picture and to experience forgiveness and pure grace and a love that will never let you go.

And because your load has been lightened, you don’t have to bend under it any longer so that all you can see is the ground, two feet in front of you. You can stand up straight now, and you can see the ocean and the boat and the charcoal fire, and you can smell and taste the delicious fish and bread, and you can see the sun coming up now and it’s morning and you’ve been with Jesus, and it’s a new day and there is work to do and lambs to feed and sheep to tend.

Amen.